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**Hints on Portraits and
How to Catalogue them**

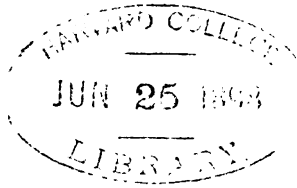
**A TALK GIVEN TO THE
FELLOWSHIP OF THE
PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY
OF THE FINE ARTS AT
PHILADELPHIA MONDAY
EVENING APRIL 18 1898
BEING THE FIRST ANNUAL
MEETING**

BY CHARLES HENRY HART

**EDITOR OF CATALOGUE OF HISTORICAL PORTRAITS
CATALOGUE OF WASHINGTON LOAN COLLECTION ETC**

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HINTS ON PORTRAITS AND HOW TO CATALOGUE THEM



HAVING, within a few days, been honored by election to this important body, I have the privilege of saying "our," instead of "your," distinguished president has asked me to administer to you to-night a sleeping potion, in the form of statistical tables giving the square miles of canvas, panel and ivory, covered with pigments, to be found in ancient Philadelphia. But having had only something short of a year in which to formulate my data, I fear I shall fall short of fulfilling his precise desires. I will, however, endeavor to give you some idea of the artistic material in our midst, and which essentially helped to give

to Philadelphia, until some fourscore years ago, the right to be looked upon as the Athens of America.

It is Philadelphia's own fault that she has lost her old prestige in art and in letters. In colonial and in revolutionary days, and well on into the present century, she was the metropolis of this broad land. We have a living proof of the truth of this right at hand in our alma mater, this dear old Academy, of whose alumni you are honored Fellows. Would it be, do you think, the oldest institution in America devoted to the fine arts if, when it was founded, in 1805, Philadelphia had not been the centre of American cultivation and of learning ?

But Philadelphia, with her retiring modesty and self-abnegation, has permitted herself to be jostled and elbowed out of her rightful sphere by more arrogant and aggres-

sive neighbors. Among ourselves, however, we cannot do otherwise than admit that this is largely the result of the narrow provincialism of her own people. Whether this condition is due to the circumscribed atmosphere of her Quaker founders and their progeny, as is generally claimed; or to the weakness and lack of appreciation shown by "those teachers of disjointed thinking," as Dr. Rush called the public press, as others feel; or to the money-grubbing propensities of her up-coming generations crowding out the finer instincts, as seems forceful, I shall not stop to discuss now. It may be a combination of these conditions with an admixture of some others in homœopathic quantities.

Whatever the cause of her present decadence in art and in letters, her old and proper place will give you an inkling of

what may be found of art treasures within her bounds, and about which I shall say a few words to-night, with special reference to the advantage and value of having such objects, their ownership and their whereabouts, adequately recorded in permanent form, conformably to your action of a year ago.*

The present is essentially an age for facilitating study, and with no higher aim can the nineteenth century draw to a close. What the Historical Manuscript Commission is doing for writings hidden away in private hordes, you propose to do for pictures, so that when the future student comes to write the history of American art, you will have furnished, to his hand, vital material for his work. For, although you propose

* "*Resolved*, That a committee of five be appointed by the president to take up the work of cataloguing the art resources of Philadelphia."

to confine yourselves to this locality, this is the locality where art in America had its birth. Until recent discoveries that I had the good fortune to make, this high place has been given to New England, with John Smibert, who came over from Scotland, with Bishop Berkeley, and arrived January 29, 1729. But I have wrested the palm from Smibert and given it to Gustavus Hesselius, a Swede, who "flyted" to Philadelphia, in May of 1711, and to whom was given, ten years later, the first public art commission in this land,—to paint an altar-piece of the Last Supper, for St. Barnabas Church, in Queen Anne's parish, Maryland.*

Nor is this the sole claim to precedence

* For an account of Hesselius and his work, with portraits, after his paintings, of himself and his wife, see *Harper's Magazine* for March, 1898, "The Earliest Painter in America." By Charles Henry Hart.

in art that Philadelphia has. Here, on January 22, 1720, was born James Claypoole, the first native American artist that we know. Unfortunately, none of his paintings have been as yet identified; but he was the instructor of his nephew, Matthew Pratt, whose work shows that he was guided by a painter of no mean skill.* Thus, you see, that while sister States and sister cities can supplement the material that you can give, you and you only can lay the foundation-stone.

While vanity is doubtless the main-spring instigating men to have their portraits painted, it is not only a pardonable vanity, but it is a laudable one. How dead the past would be but for the "counterfeit pre-

* *Vide* "A Limner of Colonial Days." By Charles Henry Hart. *Harper's Weekly*, July 4, 1896.

sentments" that we have of the men and women who lived in the days that have gone before! "We see the faithful effigies of those who have played extraordinary parts, and proved themselves select men among men. We read their countenances, we trace their characters and conduct in the unreal images, and then, as if made free of their company, follow on with redoubled animation the events in which they lived and moved and had their being." Therefore, in searching out the pictures in our midst you will be learning history in the portraits that you will find, for it is almost superfluous to say, that, by a great majority, the pictures belonging to old Philadelphia belong to the most important department in art, both historically and pictorially, portraiture. Indeed, so true is this, that in considering the subject I shall refer exclusively to portraits.

And on the threshold of any investigation or consideration of the subject, from a scientific stand-point, let me caution you—**BEWARE.** Family portraits are the most difficult personal possessions to deal with. The owners are as well satisfied and as positive that they know all about the pictures that they own, as though they had stood behind the throne while the subject was sitting and the limner painting. But the more positive the owners are the more do you need **BEWARE.** The maze of conjecture, blunders, and contradictions around old portraits is not only surprising, but points to the necessity of the utmost care in considering them and their claims to be what they are claimed to be. Take nothing for granted. Go to the fountain source, and make your determination from the best evidence that you can get, both intrinsic and extrinsic.

In a recent publication I took occasion to dwell upon this point in the following words :

“These United States of America have grown old enough to possess a distinct historical art. That this is a fact is being broadly recognized. It is shown in a marked degree by the owners of old family portraits. A few years ago their venerated ancestors could look down upon them only through the medium of a Reynolds, a Kneller, or a Lely, without the least regard to chronology or life-long distance between putative painter and sitter. To-day, with perhaps little better respect for time and place, these same ancestors are from the easels of Smibert or Copley, West or Peale, Stuart or Trumbull, while all the former Cosway miniatures are now by Malbone. We may smile at the change, but it leans in the right direction. That we may maintain our prerogative to this dignified position and see its importance increase, the questions that will necessarily arise must submit to the same scrutiny, bear the same investigation, and be tested by the same immutable rules of evidence as

every other department of historical study. Too much hitherto in this domain has depended upon tradition, that baseless fabric of a dream, which to follow is as the *ignis fatuus*, leading nowhere and to nothing."*

You will see, therefore, in order that a catalogue of such works shall have a historical and an art value, you will be required to exercise no little *suaviter in modo* with *fortiter in re*. You will have to remember that you are trenching on private property, that you are asking a personal favor. You will have to listen with patience and respect to long dissertations upon art and artists from the lips of oracles who hardly know the difference between an oil painting and

* "Peale's Original Whole-Length Portrait of Washington. A Plea for Exactness in Historical Writings." Report of American Historical Association for 1896. Washington, D.C., Government Printing-Office, 1897.

a water color, or between a miniature and a daguerrotype. You will have to accept with due reverence the ascription of a portrait—*painted from life by Copley*—of a subject who at the period delineated was no nearer to that painter's palette than a short span of hundreds or thousands of miles. If another portrait is particularly bad, you may be sure in its owner's eyes it is one of the best that Gilbert Stuart ever painted. For it is chiefly the works of one or the other of these two painters that everybody assumes to possess. It will be your most difficult task to reconcile these apocryphal statements with the facts as they do exist; but your catalogue will be "love's labor lost," if you record everything that you are told, without sifting the wheat from the chaff and using your own discriminating judgment, based on abstract knowledge, to set down

the pictures as they really are, and not as what they seem to be—in the eyes of the owner. You will find, too, that there are no problems more difficult to solve than picture problems, and no questions, excepting politics and religion, that engender more bitterness of feeling.

In exhibition catalogues such difficulties are gotten over by a disclaimer of responsibility for the ascription of authorship; but this is a most unfortunate necessity, as it reduces the value of the catalogue to a minimum, when it might be of standard authority. Not being free to correct what one knows to be wrong, owing to the extreme tenderness of other persons' toes, is one of the most serious difficulties in such work. With the object you contemplate these conditions do not necessarily exist; and unless you determine they shall not

exist, so that your work shall be reliable and dependable, you had better not waste much time over it.

When your knowledge comes in conflict with the owner's traditions, you can state courteously in your notes something like this: "The portrait of Mr. Blank, ascribed by its owner, the great-grand-daughter of the subject (you know, in this country the family portraits and heirlooms all follow the female lines), to the easel of John Singleton Copley in 1790, seems impossible to have been painted by that distinguished artist, as Copley left America in 1774, and never returned to his native land; while the subject, Mr. Blank, was never out of this country. In our opinion it is the work of So-and-so, who painted where Mr. Blank resided about the period of the picture." Let me illustrate by an actual case, which

will also show you the methods of determining such questions. A gentleman in a Western city owns a beautiful picture, which he asserts to be a portrait of "Major John André, painted by Copley, in 1780." He claims to have proof to support his assertion. The impossibility of this ascription of subject and painter is found in the unpleasant little fact that Copley left Boston in 1774, went to Italy, and did not join his wife in England until midsummer of the following year; while André, an unknown young officer, reached America in September of 1774, and, as every school-boy knows, never returned to England, owing to his tragic fate, October 2, 1780. Thus the supposititious subject and putative painter cannot be brought face to face, a rather necessary requirement, before the days of the camera, to enable an artist to paint a

portrait. I may add, having seen the picture, which is a rarely fine one, that in my opinion it is neither of André nor by Copley, as, apart from the reasons already advanced, the uniform of the officer is a dragoon's uniform, while André was of the line, and later a staff officer. Nor is the method or manner of the work in the least according to Copley's formula.

The determination of the period of a portrait raises another interesting question for consideration. My experience, resulting from the careful study of hundreds of portraits of all periods and places, has shown me that it is not only the costume, style of wearing the hair, character of ornaments, and detail of this order that must be regarded in determining this question, but the more important one of physiognomy. I am quite clear in my own mind, even

though I may fail to impress it upon you, that there are distinct types of physiognomy belonging to certain epochs as well as to nations. The face that walks the streets to-day is distinctively different from that of a generation ago, and the preceding generation differed from its successor and its predecessor. So that in passing upon portraits you must bear this in mind, and not judge alone by mere externals.

Another matter that will give you some anxious moments is determining between originals, replicas, and copies. It is quite surprising how ignorant intelligent persons are of what is meant by *an original picture*. They seem to have taken their cue from the irrepressible auctioneer who guarantees his offering as "a genuine painting or no sale." Therefore the assurance will be given to you, almost without exception, that "the

painting is original," yet some one of you may be responsible for the copy. I had a very amusing experience of this kind last September, in Virginia. I called upon the head of a collegiate institution, who also occupied a chair in one of its departments. He had to me the interest of being a kinsman of the author of the immortal Declaration of Independence, and owned, as I had been informed, "an original portrait" of his distinguished relative.* He received me courteously, and pointed to a portrait on the floor as a copy recently painted by one of his family. He then said, "I will now show you the original Stuart portrait of Mr. Jefferson," and led me into his private office, where, standing before the picture, he said,

* *Vide* "Life Portraits of Thomas Jefferson." By Charles Henry Hart. *McClure's Magazine*, May, 1898.

“There is the original Stuart portrait, painted by Galt before he made his statue down yonder,” pointing in the direction of the institution. Comment was and is unnecessary. It only serves to show how densely ignorant persons of education and intelligence can be as to such an apparently simple proposition, and emphasizes how ceaselessly you must be on your guard.

It is not necessary to tell an audience such as this—composed of artists—what an original picture is; but there may be no offence in calling your attention to the important difference and distinction between a replica, a repetition of an original painting by its painter, and a copy by another hand. In portraiture the original, painted in the presence of the sitter, is the one of the first importance. It is endowed with an animation, an intelligence, a life-likeness that will

be found lacking in the replica and wanting in the copy, no matter how good they may be.* And when you come to a copy of a copy, as you frequently will do, you will find it a mere ghost of the original ; so that the ratio between an original and a replica, and a replica and a copy, may be stated to be in about the same proportion, as the increase or diminution of the value of a diamond is, according to its size.

Do not think it is an easy matter to make a catalogue of pictures that will be of permanent value. I know by experience what it is ; and, as you have asked me to talk to you to-night on the subject, you must be good enough to think I know something about it. The knowledge requisite to

* See introduction to "Original Portraits of Washington." By Charles Henry Hart. *The Century* for April, 1889.

make a descriptive catalogue of pictures that shall be a hand-book, in more than its literal sense, is not easily gained; and, indeed, I know of very little that is easily gained that is of much value. To make such a catalogue requires a thorough knowledge of art, both technical and empirical. To be of value, a catalogue of pictures, as a catalogue of books, must be arranged throughout upon a system as simple as the subject will admit. Nor is the system wholly a matter of individual choice, but is based upon lines which have been adopted as the result of long and careful consideration by those most competent to determine them. Certain fundamental rules are applicable to every case, the key-stone of which is undeviating adherence to the alphabetical sequence of artists' names, except in catalogues exclusively of portraits,

where to the subject should be given the alphabetical preference. Under the artist's name should be grouped chronologically all of his included work. In the case of a catalogue exclusively of portraits, where the subjects are arranged alphabetically, there should be appended a list of painters in the same sequence, with their pictures grouped under their respective names. Brief biographical data of each painter should be added, showing his art life, and to each picture its history, with date of execution, signature, if any, when and where exhibited, and any information of interest connected therewith. The outside measurements in inches of the canvas or other material should follow the title, and a note be given when the material is other than canvas or the medium other than oil. A brief description is also in place, such as, for por-

traits, head, bust, kit-kat, half-length or whole length, seated or standing, profile, full-face, or three-quarters, to right or to left (of observer), with such other detail as may be pertinent in each case. The owner's name should be given, and the exact place of residence should follow, so that a record may be preserved of the whereabouts of the pictures. Such data add to the interest of the pictures, give an enduring quality to the catalogue as a hand-book of reference, and may afford invaluable aid in fixing the pedigree of a picture or in tracing one that has been lost or stolen. Another essential to such a catalogue is a date of publication, and uniformity must be observed in the make-up, in order that dependence may be placed upon the whole.*

* "Metropolitan Museum Hand-Books." In *The Critic* for May 2, 1896.

As it is much easier to learn how to do a thing when you have seen how it has been done, I may be excused for calling your attention to the two catalogues I prepared for this Academy, one of portraits and the other of the general collection. In December of 1887, there was opened here a loan collection of Historical Portraits. This was the first systematic exhibition of the kind ever held in America. That it has been appreciated more since, than it was at the time, is shown by the number of imitators it has had in the portrait exhibitions afterward held in New York, Boston, Chicago, and elsewhere. The catalogue of that exhibition covers one hundred and forty-eight pages and contains five hundred and three entries. I may be pardoned for quoting the opinion of so competent a critic and authority as Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer, to show how it appealed

to those best able to judge. Writing of the exhibition in the *New York Sun*, January 20, 1888, she said, "If one thing was more surprising than the collection itself, this was the way in which it had been hung, and especially had been catalogued. The catalogue numbers ran alphabetically, according to the names of the persons portrayed, and in the back of the catalogue was another alphabetical list of artists, with cross references to all their pictures in the collection. To each name, whether of subject or of painter, a biographical notice was appended, giving a vast amount of information often of so recondite a sort that one might look for it in vain in any previously published book." Some copies of this catalogue I have had brought here for any Fellows desiring them, as it will be one of your best guides to the ownership of the pictures you

are seeking. The other catalogue to which I referred is the "Descriptive Catalogue of the Permanent Collection of the Works of Art belonging to the Academy," first issued in May of 1892, and which is the basis of the present catalogue of the Academy's collection. An examination of the plan and scope of these two catalogues will, I believe, convey to your minds a clearer and better idea of what is needed in such work than any explanatory words of mine.

I have now told you a great deal about catalogues, but very little about the pictures you are to catalogue. Aside from old portraits in the possession of individuals, and it is in private houses that you will find the best and most interesting examples, there are few institutions in this city not owning one or more interesting portraits. Among these institutions are the American Philosophical

Society and the Library Company of Philadelphia, both the creation of Benjamin Franklin, to whom Philadelphia owes more than to any other citizen; the State-House, commonly called Independence Hall, Carpenters' Hall, where the first Continental Congress met; the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the University of Pennsylvania, the Mercantile Library, the American Colonization Society, the Musical Fund Society, the College of Physicians, the Pennsylvania Hospital, the United States Mint, and many banks and insurance companies. A catalogue of all the pictures to be found in these places and in private hands in our midst would be a magnificent work, a superb monument to this association of artists, but a herculean task that could only be accomplished in a reasonable time by united effort. Therefore, before entering upon your

labors it will be necessary for you to determine the scope of your work and to fix its limitations.

In conclusion, I think it will be of interest to you to know that I hold in my hand two catalogues of the earliest exhibitions of pictures held in this land, both of which were held in this city and in the old State-House. Robert Edge Pine, an English radical and follower of John Wilkes, came to this country, in the spring of 1784, to paint a series of historical pictures commemorative of events in the Revolutionary War, but was struck down with apoplexy before he had accomplished his purpose.* He brought with him a number of paintings, and opened an exhibition of them in the old State-House, where he had his studio. His pam-

* *Vide* "The Story of a Portrait." By Charles Henry Hart. *Harper's Weekly*, March 16, 1896.

phlet is entitled, "*A Descriptive catalogue of Pictures Painted by Robert Edge Pine. 1784. Philadelphia: Printed by Francis Bailey, at Yorrick's Head, in Market Street.*" It contains twenty-seven numbers of pictures, chiefly from Shakespeare, although No. 1 shows the sentiment that brought the painter to this country. "*An Allegorical Piece, representing America, after having suffered the several evils of the late American war, is lamenting the deaths of those brave officers who fell in the glorious cause of Freedom.*"

The other pamphlet, although a decade later, is the more important of the two. Its title reads, "*The Exhibition of the Columbianum, or American Academy of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Etc., Established at Philadelphia, 1795. The first exhibition opened May 22, 1795, by permission in the Senate Chamber in the State-House.*"

*'T'is not in mortals to command success,
But we'll do more, Sempronius, we'll deserve it.'*

Philadelphia: Printed by Francis and Robert Bailey, at Yorrick's Head, No. 116, High Street. MDCCXCV." In this first general exhibition of paintings in America there were nineteen exhibitors and one hundred and thirty-four exhibits. I am indebted for this probably unique pamphlet to one of your Fellows, who combines the tastes of the virtuoso, the habits of the antiquary, and the knowledge of the artist, Mr. Albert Rosenthal. This publication is of particular interest here and in this connection, as the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts is the direct descendant of the Columbianum, which in turn was the successor of the drawing-school started in 1791, by Charles Willson Peale, a name all Philadelphian artists, nay, all American artists, should hold

in high honor and respect for what he was and what he did for art in his time.

One word more and I have done. All of you artists who paint portraits, and there are few or none of you who, some time or another, do not, never permit a portrait to leave your easel until you have placed upon it, either on the back or on the face, the name of the subject, the year of painting, and your own signature. As you go around searching out pictures for this prospective catalogue, you will be often brought up before a stone wall which fails to reveal these important items of information, and you will wish that your predecessors had done for you what I now enjoin upon you to do for posterity.

FINIS.

